

# 1991 EXCAVATIONS AT FORT WARD

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After almost two months of work by volunteers, students and staff, Alexandria Archaeology's 1991 summer excavation season at Fort Ward Historic Park culminated in Family Archaeology Day on the sixth of July. Archaeology in Alexandria began in 1961 with the excavation of the fortifications at Fort Ward to insure an accurate reconstruction of the fort's northwest bastion. The goal of the 1991 investigation, a return to the site to celebrate thirty years of archaeology in the City, included understanding the history of the Fort Ward property not only during the Civil War, but also during the periods before and after the war. To achieve this goal, extensive archival research supplemented the data gathered during the excavation.

To date, the documentary evidence has revealed that the Fort Ward property was part of a 1261-acre parcel of land granted to Francis Awbrey on 19 February 1729 (Northern Neck Grant C:30). In Beginning at a White Oak, Beth Mitchell notes that Awbrey served as a tobacco inspector at Pohick warehouse in 1732 and later as Sheriff of Prince William County. Subsequent eighteenth century owners of this property include William Ramsay, a Scottish merchant who helped to found Alexandria and served as mayor of the town, and Robert Allison, who proceeded to divide and sell the acreage (Fairfax Deed Books C:17; Z:313,318). In 1843, the parcel which was to become Fort Ward became the property of Phillip Hooff, who owned it until after the Civil War (Fairfax Deed Book H3:173). The Hooff family, prominent in Alexandria since the late eighteenth century, has lent its name to Hooff's Run, which flows southward through the City into Cameron Run.

The Federal Army hastily began construction of Fort Ward on Hooff's property about September 1, 1861, in response to the panic in Washington after the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas). As pointed out by Benjamin Cooling and Walton Owen in their book, Mr. Lincoln's Forts, the hasty construction resulted in a number of defects, and one ravine to the northwest, where enemy forces could mass for attack, was left unprotected. In addition, the magazines and bombproofs were not designed to withstand the heavier artillery developed during the Civil War. Modifications were planned, and the final fort, completed in 1865, incorporated the many technological improvements learned during the war. The resultant structure was a model of military engineering for its time, one of 161 forts and batteries constructed to serve as a shield around Washington during the Civil War. As was the case at most of the forts ringing the capital, the soldiers garrisoned at Fort Ward, up to four hundred at a time, saw no action. Despite some attempts to maintain the fort as a military installation after the Civil War, it was deactivated shortly after its completion. Wooden structures were dismantled, and the timber, a precious commodity at the time, was sold at public auction for \$988.

The archaeological excavation has provided insight into the occupation and construction activity at Fort Ward during the Civil War. Several minie balls, uniform buttons, backpack hooks and mid-nineteenth century pipestems datable to the period were recovered during this year's investigation. The excavation focused on the Civil War barracks area, as determined by correlating the current setting with an 1863 Quartermaster's drawing. Three large post holes filled with cobbles were identified about one foot below the current surface. Lying in a straight line about four feet apart, the post holes probably once held timbers which supported the Civil War barracks. Quartermaster's plans for barracks at other forts called for construction on wooden posts, and a notation on one of the Fort Ward drawings documents that the Fort Ward barracks were to be similarly built. In addition, one of the few surviving historical photographs of Fort Ward illustrates that the barracks rested on wooden piers or footings. The archaeological post hole evidence is consistent with this method of construction. Topsoil had apparently been stripped from the area, probably used in the construction of the fort's embankments, and the barracks were built on posts dug into the newly exposed surface. A brick feature, also uncovered during the excavation, may have served as support for a wood-burning stove inside the barracks.

One puzzling aspect of Fort Ward's Civil War history revolved around the lack of evidence for a ditch on the eastern side of the embankment. Given the fort's mid-nineteenth century status as a "model of military engineering," historians speculated that the ditch, an integral part of the defensive system, should have encircled the entire structure. This season's excavation verified that the ditch had indeed existed in the area which currently appears flat.

The post-Civil War history of the site is intricately intertwined with the history of a group of African American families who purchased the property in the 1880s and 1890s, after a Chancery Court case in Alexandria authorized the sale of Hooff's land. Beginning in 1884, Burr and then Harriett Shorts became owners of the eastern part of what is now Fort Ward Park (Fairfax Deed Books E5:578-79 N8:404-08); James F. Jackson bought the westernmost section (Fairfax Deed Book Q5:466). Late nineteenth and early twentieth century owners of other parcels include: John A. Miller, Jacob Ball, John Terrell, Samuel Javins, Brook Johnson and Clara Adams (Fairfax Deed Books E5:579-82; R5:413; B6:512). The 1991 excavation focused on the parcel purchased by Miller in 1886 and subdivided shortly thereafter (Fairfax Deed Book D6:267).

Many of these individuals were instrumental in the formation of the Oakland Baptist Church, now situated at 3410 King Street. The church history documents that the Oak Hill Baptist Mission, as it was first called, began in 1888 in "a little schoolhouse on Oak Hill." The congregation was organized and recognized as the Oakland Baptist Church on September 15, 1891. Given the connection between the church founders and the Fort Ward landowners, it is tempting to speculate about the location of "Oak Hill" on or near the Fort Ward property. Foundations of a structure are present in the Oakland Baptist Cemetery, now surrounded on three sides by Fort Ward Historic Park. Several additional graves remain nearby, outside of the official cemetery boundaries. A school appears on late nineteenth and early twentieth century plats of the area south of the cemetery (Fairfax Deed Book N8:404-408). A later African American school may also have been located closer to Braddock Road on what is now park property.

Some of the artifacts from this year's excavation provide insight into this post-Civil War occupation of Fort Ward. A scatter of numerous late nineteenth through twentieth century domestic artifacts across the site may relate to the post-Civil War African American settlement. In addition, the artifacts excavated from the fill dirt of the ditch surrounding the fortification date from 1885 to 1915. Therefore, the level surface around the fort in this area was probably created in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, most likely by the post-Civil War, African American landowners. Ferreting out additional details of the history of land use on this important Alexandria landmark will require further detective work, delving into more documents at the National Archives and the Fairfax County Courthouse as well as interviewing members of the Oakland Baptist Church and descendants of its original founders.

